

[Elmer Robinson]

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TITLE Shoe Laster of Lynn - [#6?]

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COMMENTS

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“The Laster's Protective Union was organized in 1879. In 1882 I come to Lynn from Maine where I practically come up myself, because my mother died when I wuz a little fella. I wuz a laster fur a good long while ‘fore I went into organization work for the unions. About

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twenty years, I guess. “ When I asked Mr. Robinson about the unique technique of feeding himself tacks foremost from his mouth, a reminiscent smile accompanied his acting out that bit of drama for me.

“Like this?” he said as he took imaginary tacks from his mouth and pounded them into an imaginary shoe with an imaginary hammer. Mass. 1938-9

But the outstanding reminiscent interest of this informant is concerned with shoe union work.

“In the early days of the Laster's Protective Union, they had the industry sewed up. Ya just couldn't get work in Lynn unless ya had a permit from the lasters Lasters Union.

“We had a collector in every rink. Lasters usta work in sorta a circle and we called that a rink. Well, the collector collected the dues on pay night. And if there wuz a non union man workin' there, or one without a permit from the union, the boys 'ould all knock off, until he wuz let go.

“Well, the union held that kind of dictatorial 2 power until the lastin' machines come in. An' if they hadn't voted ta fight the machines they mighta kept that power.

“I always thought the unions should not have fought the machines for the followin' reasons. I'd been in St. Louis on a visit some time before and I went to a meetin' of the typographical union when the linotype machines first come in.

““What ya gonna do about it, boys'?, boys?’ I asked them ?.

““We're gonna vote for it,’ they said, “beacuse if there're any good, then we'll get the chance a runnin' em, whereas if they ain't practical, then we haven't lost nothin'.”

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"I felt that way about the niggerhead. If they wan't no good, then we wouldn't have lost nothin' by votin' for 'em. And if they did turn out to be practical, then we'd be the boys to run 'em.

"But the majority of the boys in the union felt we should fight 'em so I joined in to fight against 'em. I always believed in majority rule.

"That wuz the story in a nut shell. The old niggerhead did prove practical, and because they fought their comin', many a the men lost out on the jobs a runnin' 'em and [scab?] labor wuz brought in from outside.

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"Of course, some a the men and the union too did kinda turn over ta the other side after they seen the niggerhead wuz here ta stay. It wuz put in the factory of Mark Worthley first and afterwards one by one, the other shops took it up. Then the bed machines come too.

"Then, after a while, there wuz a scramble for them niggerhead jobs. Prices was set by the Labor Relations Board with the most ya could earn \$10 a day. That wuz good pay but some a the man men [sorta?] connived ta earn more by workin' beside a slow fella who could only get out about \$40 worth a lastin' a week. Well the smart fella would do \$10 extra work that week and get the slow fella to hand it in on his work card. Then he'd pay the fella for the favor. There wuz all kinds a tricks to the shoe makin' trade same as any other trade.

"Any one that would study the situation of the old Laster's Protective Union of them days could see how it wuz in a way, layin' the ground work for the industrial form of union that the C. I. O. has today. Because the Lasters wuz the only strong shoe union of that time, an' it jest about controlled the workers and the manufacturers. We wuz known as "the shock troops" because we could tie up a [factory?] with a strike. If all the lasters wuz out on strike, no one else could work for very long. We got so strong there for a time that any one who wanted 4 ta work at any kinda work, usta come ta us for a work permit. But

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as I said before, after the machines come, it was easy ta shove in some one else at the niggerhead, and we gradually lost a lotta power. All the strikes that wuz called to fight the machine lost out in the end.

“But all the time, the leaders in the labor movement saw the need for strong unions.

“Soon after 1900 I set out to organize the girls in the shops (stitchers). Most everyone said it just couldn't be done. But I done it all right. And sometime after they wuz organized.

I called what wuz probably the first sit down strike in America. It wuz this way.

“In a certain large shop in Lynn where they wuz puttin' out between eight and ten thousand pairs of shoes a day, the manufacturer had agreed ta raise the girls' wages and ta date the time of startin' the raise back a few weeks. Well, he kept puttin' off payin' them that back pay part of the raise.

“I tried ta get him to pay it every way I could, except call a strike. I didn't want ta do that for a couple reasons. One wuz that I didn't want ta antagonize the manufacturer if I could help it. The other wuz that if I called out all the girls in the shop, I would be makin' an awful lotta workers lose at least a coupla days pay.

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“Well, I conjured my brain and finally I concocked the following scheme.

“I said to the girls. When I give a signal in the morning, jest stop work, and then I'll disappear. They did this, just sitting still at their machines and when the manufacturer saw this he started huntin' around wild for me. But I wuz under cover and couldn't be found. But long about eleven o'clock that mornin', jest two hours after the girls stopped work, I showed up at the factory.

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“‘When will you pay the girls?’ I asked the manufacturer? He walked up ta one of the bookkeepers and asked how much he owed them. When he wuz told he turned around to me and said, ‘ I’ll pay them now, if they start to work. ‘

“All I did [wuz?] raise my hand, sorta like a salute to the girls. But they knew what I meant. Right away the machines begun ta buz again.

“Yes, that, so far as I know, wuz the first sit down strike in America. But it never got in the papers. But we organizers used it two or three times on different manufacturers in Lynn. It worked every time.”

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“From my experience in shoe union work, I always thought it took three different kinds of leaders. First would be the fella to line up the union and get the members. Then the second fella would be the one to whip the organization into shape and maybe, call a strike. The third fella would be the negotiator to settle the strike.

“When I wuz in union work I often tried to work with some one else when we had a strike. There wuz one fella in particular. Oft times I would go in to see a manufacturer fur him in settlin’ a strike, if he didn’t stand so well with the manufacturer himself. An’ all the times I wuz carryin’ out his plans only he didn’t show his face.

“An’ he often done the same for me. There’s absolutely no use tryin’ to get somewhere with a manufacturer if he’s turned against ya. It’s best ta work under cover in such a case.

“Union work is politics of a high order. Ya have ta be a good diplomat ta be a good union agent. Or else you’ll be sure ta be in hot water most of the time. The smartest union workers don’t want no notoriety [notority?] . They work from behind the scenes.”